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How to measure the right to education: indicators and
their potential use by the Committee on Economic,
Social and Cultural Rights

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of ECLAC.

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Introduction

1. The reports to be presented by States parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights should be an occasion "for a broad review of national legislation, administrative rules and procedures and practices as they affect the application of the Covenant". 1/ Reporting also "serves as a way of identifying the obstacles to the realization of rights and creates a better understanding of the common problems faced by States and of the measures, including international assistance, which should be taken to overcome them". 2/

2. The aim of this working paper is to propose an indicator system for the right to education which is useful in the above-mentioned ways. This means that it can assist the Committee's monitoring function, provide information for a participatory policy debate and supply accurate information for decision-making.

3. The set of indicators proposed herein will basically have the following orientation. First of all, it helps to choose indicators that measure the right to education, as opposed to educational achievements. Second, the way in which indicators are presented allows for a comparison between countries while making visible interrelationships with underlying problems, and thus showing obstacles to the fulfilment of the right to education in each individual country. Third, it will be argued that it is important that indicators are used in a participatory policy dialogue on the progressive realization of the right to education.

Recent research on indicators

4. The literature proposes different sets of educational indicators. One of the most prominent ones in the 1990s has been the set of international education indicators proposed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 3/ which measures a range of topics such as coverage, educational achievements, decision-making process, etc. It does not, however, include explicit indicators for measuring exclusion or inequality. As a result of the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, 18 core indicators were proposed which measure mainly coverage and quality of education. 4/ Others suggest the importance of comparability over time and across countries. This is an important requisite for international comparison and for benchmarking as suggested by Paul Hunt of the University of Waikato, New Zealand, in his 1998 paper "State obligations, indicators, benchmarks and the right to education" presented at the same general discussion.

5. Several regional projects, such as an initiative undertaken jointly by ECLAC and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), aim at elaborating indicators for Latin America to measure equity and external efficiency of the educational system. One proposal made by ECLAC's principal expert in social statistics is the use of disaggregated indicators that allow for the identification of those factors that explain exclusion and/or inequality over the educational cycle. In certain contexts, for example, the access to primary education is more likely to be

influenced by urban-rural disparities, whereas gender differences become a discriminatory factor when entering secondary education (see box No. 1).

How to present indicators: the information pyramid

6. The main idea of the indicator system proposed in this paper is to present a few disaggregated key indicators in an information pyramid and then describe interrelationships with underlying problems. Bryk and Hermanson (1994) describe the system as follows: "Each report might then resemble an information pyramid. At its top would be a limited number of key indicators of status (and when presented as a time series, of progress) in some domain. 5/ Here one example could be a key indicator for coverage, such as enrolment rates for boys and girls in a certain age group. This key indicator shows an aggregate figure. The next two levels of the pyramid elaborate on these summary indicators. At level two, a carefully chosen expanded set of statistics would afford a more in-depth understanding of the forces at work behind the key indicator. This information would be a resource for brainstorming regarding future policy efforts". 6/ This information would describe interrelationships, for example, show how female enrolment is subject to opportunity costs, cultural variables, etc. "Level three would add a further dimension by reporting on selected research studies, including case studies, programme evaluations, and small-scale quantitative studies". 7/ For an example of an information pyramid on girls' enrolment rates at secondary level, see box No. 2.

7. There are several advantages to the presentation of indicators in an information pyramid. First of all, the pyramid is a very visual way of presenting information that is relevant to different audiences. The aggregate information may be important for monitoring and for providing public information, whereas the interrelationships and research results are important for decision makers when deciding on appropriate policies. Second, where the gathering of information is concerned, key indicators, which are easily available and disaggregated will allow for a common and comparable language across countries, whereas the interrelationships allow the specific context of each country to be explained. For example, several countries can have large illiteracy rates, but for different underlying reasons. Moreover, the introduction of case studies and programme evaluations allow a variety of actors, such as NGOs and international agencies, to bring in their experiences. Third, more specific and detailed information by country will enable the experts of the Committee to have a more informed discussion and enter into a dialogue with the States parties on their specific problems, resulting in more concrete recommendations. Fourth, in the case of a State party being interested in international technical or financial assistance for policies in favour of the realization of the right to education, it will have problem analyses available which can be used for project and programme planning and for setting goals. Let us imagine that they want to improve their literacy rates by 5 per cent within the next five years. The interrelationships will show where the bottlenecks are and the case studies provide lessons learned for possible policy solutions. Moreover, an information pyramid together with benchmarking would allow for coordination of national and international efforts in favour of clearly set objectives.

The advantages and disadvantages of different
sources of information

8. One of the main arguments of this paper is that indicators have to be disaggregated in order to provide useful information for measuring the right to education. In this context, a short comment will be made with respect to the advantages and disadvantages of different sources of information.

9. Administrative registry. Indicators constructed on the basis of an administrative registry have the advantage that they are systematic and produced on a regular basis, i.e. can be compared over the years. They usually cover a large part of the population and are thus representative. Their disadvantage is that the indicators are aggregate and cannot be combined. Therefore, administrative registries can be used to indicate the enrolment rates in primary education of country X, but they cannot be used to determine where regional or gender disparities are.

10. Census. Censuses can provide very disaggregated and detailed information, but they are usually updated only every 10 years.

11. Household surveys. Household surveys have the advantage that they can be used to disaggregate and analyse information which can be combined to show interrelationships. With respect to illiteracy rates, for example, household surveys can show where the illiterates are, what their family background and their occupations are, etc. Their disadvantage is that they are based on samples and are therefore not necessarily as representative as administrative data.

12. For the construction of a relevant set of indicators it is important to take into account where the information comes from. Here, the suggestion is to make use of the comparative advantage of each information source and use, for example, administrative registry data for aggregate indicators and household surveys further down the information pyramid for disaggregation and to illustrate interrelated problems.

An indicator system to measure the right to education

13. The States parties to the Covenant recognize the right of every person to education. In its description of this right (art. 13) the Covenant stresses equality of access to primary, secondary and higher education, fundamental education for adults, constantly improving conditions for teachers, the liberty of parents to choose schools for their children and the liberty to establish independent schools. Moreover, the aim of education is set as the promotion of "understanding tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic and religious groups".

14. In order to establish an indicator system for the right to education, I propose to divide these requirements into three dimensions: (a) coverage; (b) quality of education; (c) exclusion/inequality. The question of liberty to choose the type of education will not be addressed by this indicator system, as I see a possible contradiction between the right of parents to choose schools for their children that are restricted to specific religious or socio-economic groups and the stipulation of the Covenant that education shall

promote tolerance and friendship among all nations and racial, ethnic and religious groups. There is still a lack of studies showing an international comparison of whether segregated schools contribute to or prevent tolerant behaviour.

15. I chose the three above-mentioned categories for measuring the right to education for the following reasons.

16. Coverage is the category most explicitly stated in the Covenant. Indicators for coverage should measure whether all groups in society really have access to different levels of education. As already described in former discussions on the right to education, indicators of coverage are "to be used to determine to what extent the right to education of each age, sex, social and ethnic group is satisfied in terms of conventionally defined levels (literacy, basic education, primary, middle or secondary and higher education, etc.). These indicators may obviously combine a number of variables, such as regional distribution, the urban-rural disparity, the ratio of public-sector to private-sector participation, the comparison between the same educational levels, etc." 8/ In order to measure coverage, it is not sufficient to use the concept of equality of opportunities, i.e. to verify whether national legislation provides equal opportunities before the law. Rather it is necessary to look at the outcome, i.e. measure whether different groups of society actually are in primary, secondary and higher education and where they are situated within the system. Therefore, one of the most important requirements of indicators for coverage is to provide disaggregated information to detect gender, race or other imbalances.

17. The second category, quality of education, is important, given that in order for persons to participate effectively in society, minimum standards of education must be offered and verified. Inequalities between schools should be made public so parents can make informed choices and individuals can compare the quality of education to which they have access. Here indicators will be used to provide information on the quality of education, its relevance for the labour market and on inequality of standards between schools.

18. The third category, exclusion/inequality, explicitly measures whether a State party recognizes the right of every person to education or whether certain groups are excluded from specific levels of education. Here, not only will the opportunity to access education in its different forms be measured, but also other factors that prevent certain groups from remaining in the system or from entering parts of the system. Language barriers, family background and hidden curricula constitute examples of important barriers.

19. The division into these three categories should help to distinguish the different dimensions of the right to education. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that they are closely linked, indeed indivisible. For the same reason, one indicator can be used to measure multiple dimensions, for example, disaggregated enrolment rates can be used to measure coverage as well as exclusion.

Examples of key indicators

20. As outlined above, I propose the use of a few disaggregated key indicators which will then be embedded into the national context through the information pyramid. In the following, I will provide examples of key indicators for each category:

(a) Coverage:

- (i) School enrolment, repetition and drop-out rates at all levels, illiteracy rates;
- (ii) All disaggregated data for rural-urban, male-female, different ethnic groups, immigrants and special needs;
- (iii) Young people aged 15 to 19 not attending an educational establishment who are in the labour force or undertaking household domestic tasks, by sex and per capita income quartile of household, urban and rural areas; 2/

(b) Quality of education:

- (i) Pupil/teacher ratio in private/public, urban/rural educational institutions;
- (ii) Percentage of schools which have established forms of student participation through election of subjects, teachers or self-organization;
- (iii) Percentage distribution of population 15 years old and over by educational attainment;
- (iv) Occupational category of young persons aged 20 to 29 by level of educational attainment in urban and rural areas; 10/

(c) Exclusion/inequality:

- (i) Persons aged 20 to 24 who have not surpassed their parents' educational level and who have completed fewer than 12 years of schooling, by sex and by educational level of parents, urban and rural areas; 11/
- (ii) Number of schools where the mother tongue of ethnic and racial groups is taught in relation to number of children from these groups in each region;
- (iii) Number of special programmes for immigrants and children with special needs, disaggregated by urban/rural area;
- (iv) Expenditure per pupil in private/public, urban/rural educational institutions;

- (v) Educational level and earnings of young people aged 20 to 29 with 12 years of schooling or more, by type of occupation and by numbers of years of schooling of parents; 12/
- (vi) Representation of women in textbooks compared to that of men (outside and inside the home) in titles, figures and texts; 13/
- (vii) Educational levels of the indigenous population/ethnic minorities, by language.

21. This is only a suggestion of a few key indicators. It is up to the experts of the Committee to choose indicators with the support of educational specialists in different areas so as to guarantee their relevance. This is especially important as different regions develop their educational system and move on to new problems.

22. In Latin America, for example, "despite the notable expansion of educational coverage in the region, over the last 15 years young people of different social strata have continued to face sharp disparities in terms of their opportunities for acquiring a level of education that would afford them a basic minimum of well-being. Currently, only about 20 per cent of the young people whose parents did not complete their primary education manage to complete the secondary cycle; in contrast, over 60 per cent of the children whose parents had 10 years of schooling or more do complete secondary school". 14/ It is therefore important to use new indicators, such as the one for intergenerational educational attainment, in order to measure problems of quality and inequality.

Indicators and policy dialogue

23. Within the framework of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, indicators will primarily be used for policy dialogue with interested States parties. The first step should be to monitor results with respect to the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights. Nevertheless, common indicators can also be used by other actors for policy dialogue because they help to identify national educational problems, discuss and set national priorities, and provide objectives for international technical and financial assistance.

24. Indicators can be a useful instrument for national and international NGOs, when contributing with written and/or oral information to the Committee, and to draw attention to urgent national educational problems. The information pyramid provides a space for information on the micro level and can include written background information provided by local NGOs. They can also be used by representatives of civil society for carrying certain problems into the centre of public discussion. On an international level, this is possible, for example, at the end of each session of the Committee when NGOs participate in the press conference where the recommendations of the Committee are made public.

25. For States parties, indicators on economic, social and cultural rights can be a useful instrument for benchmarking national policies. As a common

international language, they can be combined with the recommendations of the Committee to provide a clear analysis of the situation with respect to a certain right and the resources and policies necessary for its progressive realization. This clear picture is a good basis for the negotiation of additional resources from the international technical and financial assistance institutions and for the design of appropriate projects and programmes.

26. In summary, this working paper stresses two important requirements for a system of indicators for the right to education: first, that it shall provide information on the realization of the right to education disaggregated by sex, income group, urban-rural, ethnic and racial groups and special needs and not on educational attainment; second, that emphasis shall be placed on the process, i.e. how indicators are used in the discussion between the Committee and States parties, their respective civil societies and the international communities. The final aim is to assure that indicators are accepted and used for a participatory and constructive policy dialogue in favour of the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

Notes

1/ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Fact Sheet No. 16, United Nations, Geneva, 1991, p. 6.

2/ Ibid., p. 7.

3/ The set of international education indicators proposed by the OECD can be found in "Education at a Glance. OECD Indicators", OECD, Paris, 1992, p. 13.

4/ World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990. Inter-Agency Commission for the Conference on Education for All, New York, 1990.

5/ Anthony Bryk and Kim Hermanson, "Observations on the Structure, Interpretation and Use of Education Indicator Systems" in Making Education Count, OECD, Paris, 1994, p. 47.

6/ Ibid.

7/ Ibid.

8/ See "Reflections on indicators of the realization of the right to education", paragraph II, 1, background paper prepared by Victor Manuel Moncayo and Fernando Rojas, Instituto Latinoamericano de Servicios Legales Alternativos (ILSA) for the Seminar on Appropriate Indicators to Measure Achievements in the Progressive Realization of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Geneva, 25-29 January 1993, HR/Geneva/1993/SEM/BP.7, 29 December 1992. The report of the Seminar was submitted to the Preparatory Committee for the World Conference on Human Rights (A/CONF.157/73).

2/ This indicator is taken from UN-ECLAC Social Panorama of Latin America 1997 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98.II.G.3), Santiago, 1998, chap. V, table V.2.5.

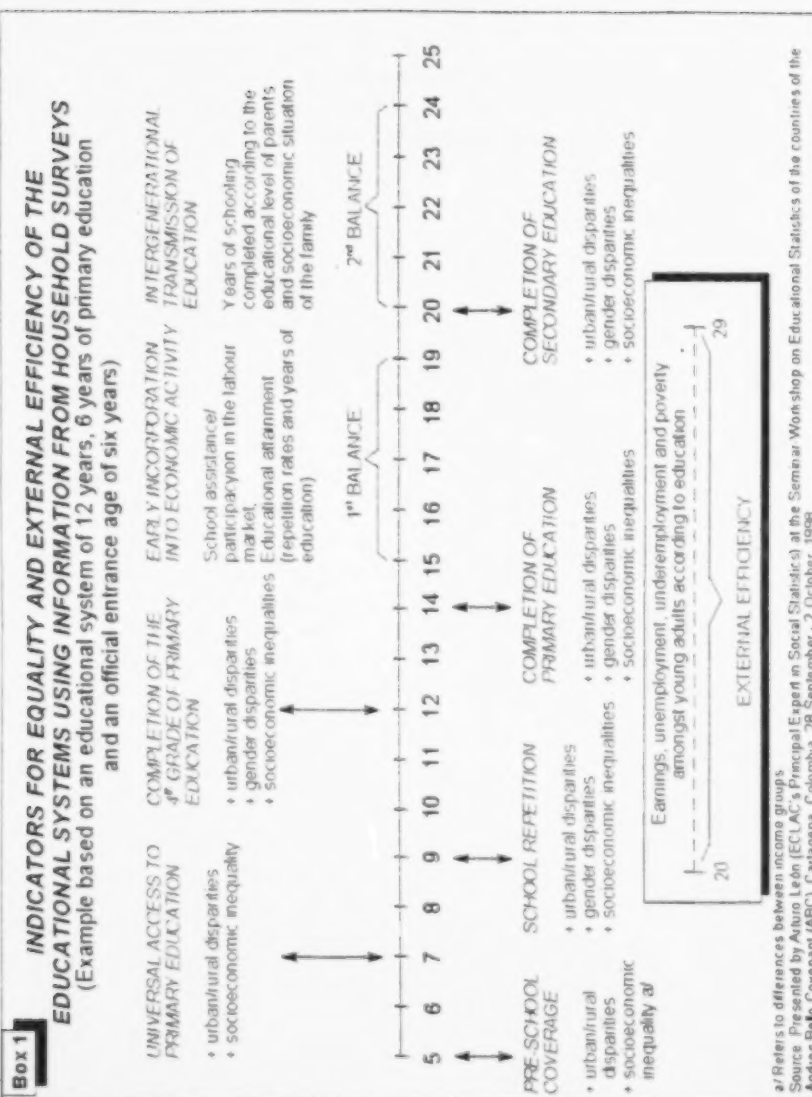
10/ Ibid., chap. IV, figures IV.3.1 and IV.3.2.

11/ Ibid., chap. IV, table IV.1.2.

12/ Ibid., chap. IV, table IV.4.2.

13/ This indicator is taken from Instituto de la Mujer, Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales de España and FLACSO, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Latin American Women. Compared Figures, Santiago, 1995, p. 105.

14/ UN-ECLAC, op. cit., p. 65.



Box 2: Example of an information pyramid

